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SIPDIS

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Classified by DCM James F. Entwistle for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

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SRI LANKA ELECTION UPDATE

¶1. (C) Sri Lanka is focused on all the little nuances of the electoral campaign. The following are some of the latest nuggets:

-- Today, February 17, is the official opening date for nominations for the April 2 parliamentary elections. Candidates have through February 24 to turn in candidacy paperwork.

-- The Prime Minister is scheduled to address the nation on television tonight. Not sure if he will say anything dramatic (the reports we get say not), but we will call you if he does.

-- The confusion regarding Milinda Moragoda's resignation as Minister of Economic Reforms has cleared up (see Colombo O/I 23). It is now official that Minister K.N. Choksy has assumed stewardship of Moragoda's former ministry.

-- There are unconfirmed reports that Ronnie de Mel, a senior MP for the People's Alliance (PA), may again switch political allegiance and return to the UNP. De Mel is a well-regarded moderate in the PA and his return to the UNP fold after some years would be good news to the PM. De Mel apparently has had a falling out with the President over the JVP alliance. Some other PA MPs are also reportedly mulling over joining the UNP.

-- Wimal Weerawansa, senior MP for the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has retracted recent comments that had the JVP rejecting the ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). (Polchief and poloff plan to meet with the JVP's top leaders on February 19 to discuss the election campaign.)

-- The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), headed by Muslim Affairs Minister Rauf Hakeem, has decided to contest the election independently from the Prime Minister's United National Front (UNF) coalition. Although the SLMC will not be running under the UNF banner like it did in the December 2001 parliamentary elections, the group will likely support the UNP in forming a government should the UNP win this April.

-- February 17 news reports are that Christian Affairs Minister John Amarasinghe has been sacked by President Kumaratunga. We have been unable to confirm the reports. (POL)

TALES FROM THE TIGERS

¶2. (C) The LTTE is also getting involved in some of the campaign action. The following are details of the Tigers recent doings:

-- A February 17 news report quotes Tiger political chief S.P. Thamilchelvam as saying that the main parties in the south -- UNP, SLFP -- have no place campaigning in the north/east Tamil "homeland."

-- Recently sacked Hindu Affairs Minister T. Maheswaran has announced that he is not running for reelection in the upcoming parliamentary campaign. Maheswaran was the only Tamil representing the UNF to be elected from the Tamil-majority northern province during the last election. In connection with Thamilchelvam statements (mentioned above), Maheswaran was most likely "encouraged" by the LTTE not to seek reelection.

-- The parties under the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) umbrella are having difficulty in using their chosen election symbol and color: rising sun and yellow/red of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). In a political dispute between the TULF's anti-Tiger leader 1V. Anandasangaree and other pro-LTTE TULF party members, Anandasangaree has warned his party that using the TULF symbols will violate a court order preventing party decisions without the leader's consent. The TNA (minus Anandasangaree) plans to meet February 17 with Thamilchelvam and other Tiger officials to decide on a final election symbol. (POL)

DCM BACK

13. (U) FYI - Jim returned to Colombo early Monday morning from FSI training in Washington.

THANKS FOR HARD WORK

14. (C) We received State 33404 on "Providing Assistance in LTTE Areas" on Friday, and want to thank everyone who contributed in the long battle to get this done. We know how difficult it has been. We are beginning preliminary consultations here on how to implement this, focusing both on what we want to get done and on due diligence to make sure we are safely within the bounds of law and policy.

LUNSTEAD